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ABSTRACT

The small group activities described in this paper resulted from the author's attempts to involve and challenge reluctant learners in an introductory college composition course. The paper describes the main types of activities used--oral discussion of readings, collaboration on structure drills, exchange of worksheets for peer correction, and peer-critiquing in triads--and describes a project in videotaping a peer-critiquing session, which was not a complete success due to technical difficulties. It reports positive outcomes of the group activities compared to outcomes noted for students in another section of the course who spent time in a writing center but had no group activities, and it includes guidelines and checklists given to students to aid them in discussing and critiquing each other's work. (GT)

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An Assessment of

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY in EG 101

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Small Group Activity in EG 101.

Since the beginning of my career in teaching, I have always been intrigued by attempts to construct a " better mousetrap " for attracting the attention of learners, reluctant ones in particular, and motivating them to improve their performance. Having long searched for new techniques in the teaching of French, as well as ESL, I readily extended the exploration into the field of English literacy on the community college level. A 1977 Summer Institute sparked an increased interest in the composing processes of students and in helping them achieve better writing competence.

As a result, I have tried numerous approaches to the teaching of sentence skills, unity, focus, specific detail and coherence of single paragraphs, with a gradual extension of this procedure to proper introductions and conclusions. The desired end product of all this maneuvering was a well-organized essay of approximately five paragraphs. Since our students seemed so sadly lacking in the most basic correct structure, the process and progress have been laborious.

This semester has turned out to be the proving ground for the comparison of two approaches, one in each of my EG 101 sections. Strictly speaking, both were a departure from the " traditional " classroom in English Composition I. As the term progressed, the traditionally conceived group scheduled to meet in the same classroom for three fifty minute periods per week became the experimental group. The " writing center mode " section met for two fifty minute periods in the classroom for large groups instruction, with the

third hour spent in the writing center in a semi-tutorial environment. It was there that they were expected to write revisions of their previously instructor-corrected writeen work, receive special attention and drills prescribed for their " structural ills ", and and call upon the instructor for individual help in all aspects of their course. While this system proved predictably helpful to the more conscientious, motivated students, it allowed the others to float along without being directly challenged.

This lack of involvement prompted me to try several types of small group activity in the " traditional " section. Following introduction of the rudimentary skills needed for effective written communication, I would try - once a week, whenever possible - to schedule reinforcement of the material taught, shifting complete responsibility for ultimate mastery to the student. On the whole, the response was favorable. Students agreed that they were actively engaged in the learning process and appreciated the responsibility inherent in teaching each other. It did not hurt them to become aware of how " the other half " - those of us earmarked to dispense knowledge - lived.

To avoid possible linguistic and stylistic recklessness, students always received exact guidelines for the criteria for success in any assignment. The activities ranged from discussion of a short story to correction of structural drills. Upon conclusion of the group effort, the result of the proceedings or a concensus - whichever was more appropriate to the specific tasks involved - was

shared with the group-at-large.

In the eleventh week, the level of mastery ascended to analysis or fully developed descriptive, narrative and comparison-contrast essays. It was at this stage that video-taping a class session of peer-critiquing in triads was planned. A fourth silent member, the impartial observer - with his/her set of instructions - was added to the team to act as official timekeeper and report on the operation of each triad.

The technical difficulties confronting this supposedly culminating activity were all but insurmountable. The resultant modifications and adjustments on the part of the group rendered this segment of the project considerably less authentic than originally envisioned. First of all, the only well-functioning portable unit was out on permanent loan for an on-going project in data-processing and could not be disturbed. Consequently, only a simulated class session in the TV studio could produce the desired results. Two days before the magic event, it was disclosed that, in the absence of a sound filtering system, a normal class conducted in small groups would come across like the Tower of Babel. The final solution, then, turned out to be quite contrived. To avoid sound interference, the triads were video-taped separately. Since this procedure pursued in its entirety would have been prohibitively time-consuming, only one third of each triad's activity was captured on TV, (the critiquing of the essay of one team member). Even under these circumstances, the process took three class sessions, one of them taken up by re-taping the original introduction, wherein the instructor's voice was accompanied by snow on the screen.

The result was non-too-realistic. The activity seemed fragmented since the change of participants made it obvious that the groups were not at work simultaneously. This artificiality, coupled with the innate nervousness of students unaccustomed to TV studio surroundings, resulted in a product hardly representative of the " real thing ". Gone were the vigorous give-and-take and serious dedication to the task, to be replaced by a meek, robot-like "let's get it over with as soon as possible" image.

All the trials and tribulations notwithstanding, the objective results of the project pointed to success. The experimental small groups section showed better attendance, more enthusiastic participation and higher grades. First drafts of written assignments were in on time and completed with much greater care. After all, they would be evaluated by one's peers out in the open, rather than in the privacy of the instructor's office or home. - An unexpected fringe benefit was the remarkable rapport between class and instructor. This aspect bears further verification to eliminate chance factors. At the moment, one might theorize that - having walked a mile in the instructor's moccasins - the students became much more understanding of and sympathetic to the cause of teaching.

The operational procedures for the small group - mostly triad - activities fell roughly in three categories; the purely oral discussions of readings along established guidelines, with a concensual report to the group; collaboration on structure drills, with oral report on group effort - following exchange of work-sheets

for written peer-correction; finally, peer-critiquing, the most structured activity conducted in distinct stages and repeated - in identical form - three times per triad. Initially, the writer, (author of the essay), would read his/her first draft twice. During the readings,the peer critics would make comments in appropriate spaces on the check-list. Next, each critic gave oral feedback to the writer. Now it was his/her turn to take notes on this feedback given in the form of constructive suggestions, questions or requests for clarification - to be used or discarded in the process of revision to produce the final draft. Possible collusion on the written work was eliminated due to the fact that the instructor was still the final arbiter of the revised copy to be handed in at the next class period. The writers then had to be prepared to explain and research, (if necessary), the origin of their final errors as indicated by the instructor.

With the end of the semester close at hand, it may be stated with reasonable assurance that the experimental group has come to considerably better grips with effective written communication that its " writing center mode " couterpart. - A representaive sample of guidelines and check-lists for various small group activities have been attached.

P.S. On the holistically graded exit standard essays, evaluated by two instructors other than the student's own, the experimental groups had no unacceptable papers and two excused absentees, while the writing center group had two unacceptable papers and six unexcused absences.

EG 101 - GUIDE to DISCUSSION.

I. Rotate papers for quiet reading

II. Make written comments concerning sentence skills

III. Return papers to author

IV. Listen attentively to author's reading

V. Make comments as indicated on the sheet below

VI. Authors: take notes on comments

VII. All participants: rewrite with comments in mind

Composition aspects to examine:

FOR CONTENT

Topic sentence

Support

Coherence(logical organization)

Need for:

1. elaboration
2. clarification

FOR SENTENCE SKILLS

Spelling

Punctuation

Sentence fragments

Run-on sentences

Dangling

1. modifiers
2. phrases
3. clauses

Verb tenses

Subject-verb agreement

Parallelism

GUIDE TO ESSAY PEER CRITIQUING

CONTENT:

1. Does the essay support the thesis statement?
2. Is the plan of development followed in the body paragraphs?
3. Is there enough specific evidence to support the topic sentences in the body of the essay?
4. Is the summary a restatement of the thesis and its main points, a set of conclusions?
5. Does the essay have an echo, or a rounding-off sentence?
6. Are there transitional elements?
7. If so, where are they located?
8. What categories of transitional elements are represented?
9. What strategy is used to lead up to the thesis? (general statement, opposite, explanation of importance, a brief story, a series of questions, or a quotation)
10. If transitional sentences were used, what were the key words that were used to tie the two paragraphs together?

Sentence Skills:

1. Sentence fragments
2. Run-on sentences
3. Verb endings (regular and irregular)
4. Subject-verb agreement
5. Dangling words
6. Parallelism
7. Pronoun usage

PEER-CRITIQUING CHECK-LIST.

CONTENT:	A	B
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		
Sentence Skills:		
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		

GUIDE TO OBSERVERS: DO NOT PERMIT DISPUTES or VALUE JUDGMENTS.

I. KEEP TIME

A. Allow 2 minutes for each station while papers are circulating for correction of sentence skill errors (12 min. total)

B. Allow 3 minutes per writer for reading of essay (Each writer will read his/her paper twice).

C. Allow 2 minutes per comment per listener

} 7 min./unit; 21-23 min. total

II. Report on operational procedures of each triad(NO INDIVIDUAL NAMES, PLEASE!)

	participation	procedure	actual critique count	
			sent.skills	content
Triad A				
Triad B				
Triad C				
Triad D				
Triad E				